

Through Israeli-Arab students' perspective: The choice and influence of higher education studies in Education at a Jewish college

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Abstract

This study examined what led undergraduate Israeli-Arab students to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish academic institution, and the influence of this academic choice on them. The study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 33 students.

Findings show that the choice stemmed from a desire to lead social change within their own society; to imitate an educational role-model from their past; to realize a dream of even higher education; and among the female students, also because this field suits the role of women in Arab society. The interviewees claimed that the influence of their studies was that they felt more openness towards others and those who are different from them; they felt pride and self-confidence in their abilities; and the women mentioned that they felt empowered.

Keywords: *higher education, Arab students, hegemony, identity, minority, undergraduate students*

Introduction

Arab society is a minority of the indigenous people (unlike a minority of immigrants, for example) in a Jewish state. With the founding of the State of Israel, the Arabs, who had been a majority during the period of the British

Mandate, suddenly became a minority in their own country (Cohen, 2000; Morris, 1991). Still today, Israeli-Arab society's collective identity has several components: citizenship (Israeli), nationality (Palestinian), ethnicity (Arab) and religion (Islam, Christianity or Druze), and this is how they perceive it – as a mix of four components, as a fine balance between them all, or as one identity which switches to another (Smoocha, 1998, 2005). Higher education empowers minorities because it creates more opportunities in the job market and the political arena for those who acquire it. In this manner, the situation of the minority group can improve economically, educationally, and politically (Arar & Mustafa, 2009). This study examined what led undergraduate Israeli-Arab students to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish academic institution, and the influence of this academic choice on them.

Higher Education among Israeli-Arab

There is an ongoing trend of an increasing rate of Israeli-Arab students attending academic institutions. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady rise in the number of Arabs studying in Israeli institutions of higher education (Mustafa & Arar, 2009). The increase has been especially high following the reforms in the early 1990s allowing the establishment of academic colleges in addition to the research universities. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Arab students compose 13% of the total number of students in Israeli institutions of higher education (Erdreich & Rapoport, 2002).

In October 2010, the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) signed its first periodic multi-year agreement with the Ministry of Finance. Formally called the "Six-Year plan to Enhance Accessibility of Higher Education for the Minority Population in Israel", this 305 million New Israeli Shekel (NIS) plan provided an overarching strategy to try to remove the barriers along the path to higher education for Arab citizens -

from high school through advanced degrees and into employment. The six-year plan included education counseling centers supporting high school students, pre-academic preparation, programs for first academic year success, career development courses and academic scholarships (Hai, 2012). Between 2010 and 2017 (CHE, 2018), there was a 60% rise in the number of Arab undergraduate students in higher education institutions. However, among the Bedouin population of the Negev region, this number remains low. The representation of Arab students rose by 66% in the humanities and social sciences, and by 87% in business management. According to the CHE (2018), the representation of Arab students in medical studies and paramedical professions rose only slightly during those years, but their percentage within the total number of students is high (20% and 27% respectively).

The new multi-year plan 2016/2017-2021/2022 for higher education includes the allocation of an additional 500 million New Israeli Shekel (NIS) toward the integration of Haredim (ultra-orthodox Jews) and Arab Israelis into academia. According to the CHE the targets set for 2022, Bachelor's degree - 17%, Master's degree - 14% and Doctoral degree - 6.7%, were already achieved in 2019. From the data, it emerges that in 2008, 22,543 Arab students were enrolled in academic institutions in Israel for all degree levels, and their number doubled within a decade to 48,627 in 2018 (CHE, 2019).

Higher education: Challenges of Israeli-Arab students

Despite the impressive rise, the number of Arab students in higher education institutions in Israel is low compared to the population (Yogev, 2003; Hai, 2012). For Israeli-Arab, barriers to higher education are two-fold: first, there is a lack of sufficient encouragement and preparation for higher education at primary and secondary school levels and, second, upon admittance, they encounter additional obstacles that can prevent them from reaching their

potential. Being deprived of the necessary cultural capital, they lack basic knowledge about colleges and courses as well as basic skills regarding how to apply and complete admission procedures, how to finance their college education and how to define their career goals (Hager & Jabareen, 2015).

Numerous challenges have been identified as impeding admission to, academic success in and graduation from Israeli academia of Arab students as well as ones from other ethnic minorities and nationalities: these are inadequate high school education, language barriers, underdeveloped study and critical thinking skills, the low number of Arab students achieving matriculation certificate that meets academic standards, low scores in the psychometric exam, low participation in available pre-academic courses, lack of knowledge, the clash between their traditional culture and the modern Jewish-western culture, awareness and understanding of the Israeli system of higher education, the admission screening procedures which may be culturally biased, economic barriers making it hard to cover tuition fees, and also peer group differences because most Arab students admitted to higher education institutions are at least two years younger than their Jewish counterparts since the latter are required to complete two or more years of mandatory military or civilian national service after high school. Moreover, for Arab students, attending higher education is often the first occasion of leaving their homes and their traditional communities (Gamliel & Kahn, 2004; Hai, 2012; Mustafa & Arar, 2009; Abu-Saad, 2006).

The Arabic-speaking education system in Israel is separate from the Jewish Hebrew-speaking system and its resources are fewer (Golan-Agnon, 2006). It receives less direct state funding and less from local authorities, due to constant discrimination and deprivation of the local Arab authorities compared to their Jewish counterparts. The gap between the two systems is greater still, given that the parents in Arab society tend to belong to the low socio-economic cluster and

their abilities to pay for education are limited (Arar, 2012; Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013).

Although Arabs in Israel begin studying Hebrew in primary school, the level they reach seems to be insufficient for higher education studies (Hager & Jabareen, 2015). In Israeli higher education institutions, Arab students must understand lectures conducted in Hebrew, they must read and understand academic articles written in Hebrew and English, and they must submit coursework in Hebrew (Al-Haj, 2003). Research shows that even Arab students who are relatively fluent in Hebrew often find this overwhelming. For the first time in their lives, they are located and must function in a demanding environment which operates exclusively in Hebrew (Roer-Strier & Haj-Yahia, 1998; Saban & Amara, 2002). Arabic is almost completely absent on campus. Signs are in Hebrew and English and there are virtually no courses, conferences or other official activities held in Arabic (Maayan, 2013).

Many studies show that at all stages of the education system, the achievements of Arab students in Israel are lower than those of Jewish students (see for example, Arar & Mustafa, 2011; Kennet-Cohen, Cohen & Oren, 2005), and their odds of dropping out are higher (Abu-Saad & Khalil, 2009). Scores in the Israeli internal evaluation 'Meitzav' tests (grades 5 and 8) show a large gap between the achievements of Arab pupils and those of Jewish pupils, and the eligibility rate for a matriculation certificate is also lower (Swirksi & Dagan-Buzaglo, 2009). The psychometric scores for university admission also show a gap between the two populations – the average score on the tests administered in Arabic are 100 or more points lower (SD close to 1.0) than for the parallel version in Hebrew (Maagan & Shapira, 2009).

These obstacles prevent many Arab students from gaining admission to studies in areas they are interested in, and so they turn to other fields of study.

According to Mustafa (2007), many Arab students study humanities, despite their preference for social sciences. Quite often this step leads to high rates of dropout from higher education in Israel, and to a move to universities in other countries (Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2009; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2012).

Academically, culturally and personally, Arab students need to improve their Hebrew to an academic level since there are no Arab universities in Israel. Many students are not sufficiently fluent in Hebrew, and thus have difficulty understanding and summarizing lectures or reading and understanding academic articles. They also experience difficulties writing papers in Hebrew (Mustafa, 2015). Even though they start learning Hebrew as a second language in Grade 4, they still regard higher education in Jewish institutions as an important, and often recognize it as the only means of achieving social mobility, both as individuals and as a group (Mustafa & Arar, 2009; Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2007).

Quite often, the path of Arab students' coping with the new environment of academia is filled with crises, mainly because, for the most part, they come from a traditional rural environment (Erdreich & Rapoport, 2002). However, Arab society in Israel is not stagnant, but rather is in an accelerated process of social and cultural change from a conservative society, which in the not so distant past was based on agriculture, to one with signs of modernity (Ben-David, 2004). Despite these signs of development, the Israeli-Arab students come from a community that still retains many traditional features (such as religion, the families' honor, hiding thoughts and personal feelings, inferiority of women to men as well as the women's expected behavioral code of obedience, conservatism, and modesty), and suddenly find themselves in a new socio-cultural environment in which Jewish-Western culture is dominant (Erdreich &

Rapoport, 2002; Hager & Jabareen, 2015). This experience tends to impact Israeli-Arab women, who have usually had even less exposure to the dominant Jewish culture prior to their academic studies, than their male counterparts (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011).

Being a minority on campus is definitely an obstacle. The fact that Muslim and Christian Arab students learn in a Jewish academic institution creates tensions and difficulties. Arab students experience a lack of cultural and religious sensitivity on campus. For example, on most campuses, the academic calendar ignores the existence of Muslim and Christian religious holidays and, frequently, institutions lack clear policy regarding absences for religious or cultural reasons. This is particularly problematic when holidays occur during exam periods (Al-Haj, 2003; Mayyan, 2013). The Arabs, who are born and raised in Israel, are somewhat familiar with Israeli society but are still seen and treated as non-Jewish ‘others’ and even as a potential ‘fifth column’ where security is concerned (Erdreich, Lerner & Rapoport, 2005).

In the case of students from minorities, the encounter with the academic world is often a clash between their ethnic origin and the demands and expectations of the new academic space (Nasir & Saxe, 2003). The exposure to knowledge and to this space might undermine the beliefs and values according to which they were raised, since the academic institution is also a place where the learners develop their personalities (Oplatka & Tevel, 2006).

Their learning and belonging to the academic world affect the consolidation of their identity. The knowledge afforded to minority groups in the academic space can be conceptualized as a “new academic identity” involving academic thinking and culture (Arar, 2011, 2015, 2017). The academic space allows them to encounter other values and cultures that make them examine their own values

and contrast them with the values of the new space (Perry, 2000). The academic campuses cast doubt on previously held conceptions of what is 'correct' or 'incorrect', 'good' and 'bad', 'truth' and 'power', disrupting what was once a coherent identity and leaving room for dialectic deconstruction and reconstruction of identity (King et al., 2013).

University space and the culture and social discourse it creates for the student was discussed by Bourdieu (1988), who maintained that their significance extends beyond that of imparting knowledge or education. He did not perceive university knowledge as pure science alone but rather as cultural knowledge that is influenced by a specific sociocultural context that shapes it accordingly. The impact of university on identity according to Bourdieu's approach (Sarup, 1996) sees identity formation as a changing, heterogeneous, and conflictual process. The term 'identity' no longer refers to a permanent essence, but to multiple identities that are located within every person and are influenced by the cultural and social surroundings as well as by the diverse knowledge the person is exposed to. This knowledge affects the conceptualization of the 'self' and the individual's identity construction (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Weiner-Levy, 2008). Higher education thus also influences the interpersonal dynamic and the formation of the identity and the change that the more educated person undergoes, as well as the adoption of a new lifestyle and the detachment from previous life patterns (Brooks & Waters, 2011).

Research aims and questions

This study has two main aims: to examine what led undergraduate Israeli-Arab students to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish academic institution, and to investigate the influence of this academic choice on them from their own perspective.

Based on these aims, we derived the following questions:

1. What led students from the Arab sector to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish academic institution?
2. How do students from the Arab sector perceive the influence these undergraduate studies are having on them?

The Research

Research sample

The study included 33 students (20 women and 13 men) from the Arab minorities in Israel studying for a bachelor's degree in Education in an academic college located at the center of Israel. The students' ages range from 19 to 50 years old. Twenty-two students come from the central region of Israel, eight from the south of the country and three from the north. Two criteria determined the participants' selection: their willingness to participate in an interview that could take time, and we were seeking for Arab students both from traditional village and urban communities of origin who studied in the Arabic education system prior to college. The academic college was selected because of being a multicultural academic institution providing a welcoming and adaptive learning environment for Israel's largest minority student populations, including men and women from Ultra-Orthodox, Ethiopian, and Arab backgrounds.

Research methodology and instruments

The study was based on the qualitative paradigm of data collection and analysis, which allows for a profound and comprehensive description of a phenomenon, its complexity, and the context in which it occurs (Stake, 2005). The study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, which enable a great deal of flexibility and space for spontaneous interaction, along with a clear definition of the main issues the interview aims to explore (Patton, 2002).

Data collection Procedure

At the first stage, three students were selected for a pilot study using a snowball strategy. The rationales for undertaking the pilot were to test an interview protocol, and it was also hoped that any other practical issues and difficulties could be discovered and resolved before the main study began. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the academic college, and each lasted between 40 to 55 minutes. Member checking was used for requesting verification, amendments, and feedback on the pilot process. At the second stage, during their second year of studies for an undergraduate degree in Education, and as part of an exercise in the Qualitative Research Methods course, students were asked to be interviewed. Every interviewee who agreed signed a consent form. The interview schedule contained open questions beginning with general questions and then transitioning to more focused ones. Initially interviewees were asked to share personal details about themselves and were then asked: “Why did you choose to study a degree in Education? What was your personal dream regarding this choice?” Following this, interviewees were asked to describe the effect studying was having on them at the time. The interviews were conducted at the academic college each lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. All the interviews were transcribed and translated to English. The study was granted approval by the academic college ethics committee.

Data Analysis

The data underwent content analysis, a procedure that searches for prominent and meaningful elements that recur in the data. The data analysis was performed as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (1995). In the first stage each interview was analyzed individually after being read. In the second stage a comparative analysis was drawn between the interviews to find common patterns. Classifying the data into major themes was the core of the main conclusions arrived at by the end of the process. In the final stage we read the

interviews more meticulously, each relevant paragraph was encoded to a certain category, with a note of the number of the interview from which it was extracted. The final themes were selected according to the contents that emerged from the findings.

Quality assurance

The participants had the opportunity to review the transcriptions at the end of the entire data collection period to ensure accuracy and provide additional research data or to correct factual errors. Peer debriefing was used to provide feedback and to verify evolving interpretations of the study.

Findings

The findings' chapter contains two subchapters addressing the two research questions, respectively. The first subchapter deals with what led undergraduate Israeli-Arab students to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish academic institution; The second subchapter deals with the period of the studies themselves, to investigate the influence of this academic choice on them from their own perspective.

a. Students' perceptions of what led them chose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish college.

Four main themes were extracted from the interviewees' responses concerning why they chose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish college: The desire for social change; Imitation of an educational role model; A basis for realizing another educational dream; Adaptation to the role of women in the Arab society.

The desire for social change

The interviewees mentioned their desire to acquire higher education to create change in the schools within the Arabic sector in Israel. Their choice stemmed from their personal experiences as pupils. From the understanding that their education system is not good enough, and the belief in their own ability to create change. Student S. described his personal experience in this context:

While I was growing up in the Negev, there was not a good education system for the Bedouin. This meant that schools were few and not everyone attended school. I always knew that we, in the Bedouin community, needed to treat education seriously and invest in it. So that a new generation of influential and educated people could develop. I wanted to make a change. I knew I could study and that one day I will be an educator in the Bedouin community, and change the lives of children for the better.

According to the interviewees, the most outstanding achievement would be social change which would lead to an increase in the number of Arab students who obtain higher education. This is how Student B. described his desire to take part in achieving this goal:

I saw that our community had the lowest achievements in Israel. I want to bring about change, so that pupils will succeed at colleges and universities. My dream was to be a teacher and see our sector succeed more. I believe that education will change the bad to good.

The interviewees' desire to acquire higher education to create change, seems to also stem from a social aspiration to provide a solution for the vulnerable members of Arab communities. Student N. explained her personal dream which brought her to study education:

Education is the way to integrate into the society in which we live in. My dream is to be someone who can positively influence people and society; to help people in our

community who really need help, like youth at-risk that the Arab society does not pay attention to and is not interested in.

Imitation of an educational role model

According to the respondents, while at school as pupils, the interviewees had encountered educational figures who inspired them to choose to study education. They chose this field in order to emulate those educational role models, and to propagate their educational methods. Student R. described her teacher from elementary school:

When I was in elementary school, I had a very good teacher and I loved her like a mother. I loved her character and I wanted to be like her. That is why I started to study this degree. One day I had a computer test and did not understand anything. She came to my class and helped me learn. To this day, I am grateful to her for helping me study for the test.

Student M. emphasized the desire to emulate a teacher who was an educational role model for her - in the way he taught and in his personality as a mentor who supported his students:

During high school, I had a very good Hebrew teacher. He let us learn through classroom discussions and discovery. I drew a first glimpse at my own future and the desire to study education from him. He was a patient teacher, listening to pupils while encouraging them. He always said that through failure we can succeed. If you fail you should be happy, as there may very well be an opportunity for reexamination, improvement, and greater success.

At times, educational figures were part of the interviewees' close family. This proximity strengthened the students' desire to emulate them. Student A., for example, spoke of his uncle, from whom he drew the inspiration to choose education studies:

I chose to study for a degree in Education because my uncle was a very good school principal. I saw him as a great man and wanted to be like him. He was a dominant man with control over the pupils. They all loved and respected him.

A Basis for Realizing another Educational Dream

The responses of the interviewees indicate that in their perspective, the choice to study for a degree in Education is the first stage on the path to achieving higher professional aspirations in the field of education, or a transfer to other professional studies. The interviewees said that this degree was a springboard to the realization of their dreams.

Student Z. spoke of her aspiration to obtain a master's degree in order to work as an educational counselor:

I wanted to get a degree in Education in order to pursue a master's degree in Educational Counseling. My dream was to be an educational counselor at school, and this was the easiest way to fulfill my dream. The Bachelor of Education would put me on the path to a counseling degree.

Regarding their choice to study Education as a basis for other professional fields, some interviewees mentioned their desire to transfer to nursing studies. Analysis of the interviews shows that the relatively simple prerequisites were the main consideration in choosing the Education degree, and that the psychometric examination is considered the main obstacle. This is seen in the remarks of Student M.:

I have dreamed of studying nursing my entire life. I want to work in this field, to help sick people feel better. I chose to study for a Bachelor of Education because of the admission requirements. I did not have a high enough score in the psychometric exam. I will have a degree in Education, and then I'll transfer to nursing. That is the way to realize that dream.

Adaptation to the role of women

The interviews show that for women, the choice of a degree in Education stems from a desire to pursue a suitable profession in the future. According to the female interviewees, the degree is appropriate for their role as married women and mothers in the Arab society. Student O. expressed the suitability of educational studies for her as a woman:

At home it was always suggested that I should become a teacher and that it would be suitable and fitting profession for me as a woman. I thought about it and saw that it is indeed possible and works for me. I thought about the job conditions and came into to the conclusion that as a woman it is good for me.

Student D. said that she decided to study Education because of her father's advice:

At first, I did not think I would work in education as I always preferred cosmetics. But after starting to work as an educational assistant at school, I became very connected to the field and thought that it was possible to find work in it and develop a career. Following my father's recommendation, I chose to study Education. He told me that one can easily find work; it's convenient for women and can be combined with household responsibilities.

b. Students' perceptions of the influence these undergraduate studies are having on them.

Three main themes were extracted from the interviewees' responses concerning the influence these undergraduate studies are having on them from their own perspective: Open-mindedness towards others; Pride and Self-Confidence; Women's empowerment.

Open-mindedness towards others

Interviewee responses revealed that they mentioned being exposed to new information. The knowledge acquired led them to better understanding and openness to the opinions, and differences of others. Student E. described it thus:

During my studies I am gaining much knowledge, which I would otherwise not have access to. I am learning to accept and be open to different opinions and desires; to really pay attention to the differences between the students, and to know how to accept and help each one of them in a different way.

According to Student H., the knowledge acquired changed her way of thinking and her behavior with those around her:

In my studies I feel very confident as I speak a high level of Hebrew and understand everything. When I began studying, I started hearing new concepts and things which at the time, I did not know at all. I feel that thanks to my studies I now have a new way of thinking. I acquired a lot of knowledge about how to behave around people, and how I can understand people who are different from me. I began changing my behavior around my friends and family, because a Bachelor of Education instills values in us that must be adhered to.

Pride and Self-Confidence

The Interviewee responses show that being students gives them self-confidence, because the society they come from values the knowledge they acquire. As Student K. described:

The perception of studies in the society I come from, gives an added value of significance and status. So, I feel different in that I have added new content to my life, which gives me greater self-confidence and a sense of satisfaction as I feel others value me.

The students mentioned in particular that their families' pride was important to them, as seen in the words of Student V:

My degree studies give me a sense of satisfaction, enjoyment, and admiration which is reflected in the appreciation of those around me. Everyone at home is proud and pleased with me. My knowledge has expanded and today I have the necessary tools to overcome the educational challenge. This is expressed in my self-confidence and capabilities as a future educator.

The interviewees mentioned the pride and self-confidence they acquired thanks to their studies. Their self-esteem increased. This is how Student G. described it:

The studies added a lot to my personal life. I feel a sense of self-satisfaction now that I have finally begun to learn what I wanted to for so long. I consider myself equal to the rest of my peers who finished studying before me and have started working. I feel better with myself for beginning my studies and fulfilling my dream. It made me feel better inside because I can reach my dream. The studies are very interesting and challenging. I find the place to express myself with confidence, and the status itself also gives me a sense of satisfaction. It fulfills me. Every lesson and lecture stimulate brainstorming which leads to deep thought.

Self-confidence is also expressed, according to Student T., as the ability to deal with failure:

Being a student is a great thing and a truly an amazing experience. This degree is teaching me many things. The most important thing is how to move forward, and that if I fail at something, there is always a second chance. I started to be proud of my abilities and to be serious.

Women's empowerment

The women's responses indicate that their studies, change their perspective about themselves and their abilities. This is expressed more by the younger women, as explained by Student K., who spoke about self-actualization:

The courses are very interesting and the material I am learning is essential and important; it provides professional knowledge and basic principles for understanding education. It is an amazing thing to learn, to acquire new knowledge which is extremely relevant to my day-to-day life. I am developing my abilities and becoming a more intellectual woman for the sake of self-actualization.

Student P. described the feeling of empowerment, which derives from the ability to combine her studies with motherhood:

My studies have really contributed to strengthening my self-confidence and sense of efficacy. I am very proud of myself as a married woman with four children. I study and manage despite all the challenges and responsibilities. I had to find time for myself, to fulfil my dreams and be self-empowered. I see it as a challenge to continue succeeding and prove to everyone that I can handle it.

Student C.'s sense of empowerment stems from her choice to study despite her age, and from the vast knowledge she is acquiring:

Studying for a degree in Education gave me a lot of good things. I was afraid of what others would say, especially because I am 40. My studies have added a sense of self-confidence and a desire to make a difference in my life and in our society; to realize my goals, to strengthen and empower myself. As a woman, not only be at home with the children. But it also teaches me how to behave properly with my children. With the support of my family and the college lecturers, I feel that I am strong enough to succeed.

Discussion & Conclusions

This study examined what led undergraduate students from Israel's Arab sector to choose to study for a degree in Education at a Jewish college, and how the students perceive the influence these studies are having on them. Findings reveal that one of the main reasons for choosing this degree, is the need for social change within their own society. The students related to the fact that the Arabic sector, particularly among the Bedouin, underachieves in education. Therefore, they feel obligated to improve this situation. They evidently feel that studying for a degree in hegemonic Educational institute is necessary to support the more vulnerable in their society, such as youth at risk or pupils in special education. They perceive the sad truth that hegemony determines what is appropriate and inappropriate, correct and incorrect, and acceptable and unacceptable in a given society. The response to hegemony is difficult- either conform or experience marginalization. Paradoxically, through socializing in a way that fails to comply with perceived societal regularities – one may be unnoticed and disregarded, leading even to the inevitable repression of one's minority culture.

It further emerges that by choosing to study Education they hope to raise the percentage of Arab students in higher education. It probably be that the low representation of Arabs in higher education, derives from the fact that the budgets allocated to Arab local authorities and education systems are lower than those for the Jewish sector (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). The Arab sector education budget is only about 30% of that of the Jewish sector, and there is no doubt that this also affects students' achievements (Golan-Agnon, 2006), and their success in national and international examinations (Swirski & Dagan-Buzaglo, 2009). All of this drives the Arab students with greater urgency to take part in educational leadership, that will lead change and social justice in

education. Which they believe will be enabled by their own studies in Education.

One of the interesting points arising from the interviewees' responses, in the context of their studies and their integration into the job market, was that they see the degree in Education as a basis for a different educational dream. In more than one instance, these students were not accepted elsewhere, and they chose the degree in Education as a springboard for further education. Some interviewees said that they wanted to study nursing but did not meet the stricter admission criteria. This finding matches the research literature, which indicate that the psychometric scores for Arab applicants are significantly lower than those of the Jewish applicants (Yogev, 2003; Mazawi, 2003; Mana'a, 2008; Maagan & Shapira, 2009; Golan-Agnon, 2006).

Responses from the female students reveal, that some of them chose the degree in Education because they believe it suitable for women. The choice among women to study Education is acceptable in the Arab sector because it is considered a female profession and convenient for mothers. Especially since most of them marry at a relatively young age. Despite trends of modernization and liberalism, Arab society in Israel is still very conservative when it comes to the status and place of women. It is a patriarchal society, and the woman is expected to remain at home and fulfil the traditional roles of mother, wife, and housewife (Totry, 2008; Abu-Rabia-Queder & Weiner-Levy, 2008). These cultural codes make it hard for Arab women in Israel to develop personally and professionally, and they often lower their ambitions accordingly (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2007; Shapira & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2009).

The research findings show that the interviewees also chose Education studies because of their desire to follow an educational role-model that they were

exposed to at school, or to follow the footsteps of a close family figure involved in education. Their ambition is to emulate these educators in terms of the level of knowledge and how they passed it on to their pupils, and also in terms of the ability to offer emotional support to their pupils. These findings match how Arab students with modern cultural characteristics perceive the characteristics of a good teacher (Awad, Zoabi & Khalil 2010).

The exposure to new knowledge in the Education degree studies led to change among the interviewees; change expressed in openness to other opinions and knowing how to accept the different 'other'. Similarly, they mentioned the importance of the academic experience in shaping their personality. This finding concurs with the literature regarding the influence of higher education on the perception of self and of the other (Luccy, 2003). The change occurs following the encounter between the circles of belonging and the sources of knowledge acquired in the various academic courses. There is no doubt that following the acclimatization into the new academic space, the Arab students feel they are constructing a new identity – one that reinforces their abilities, giving them new tools and ways of coping. The findings of the study show that students feel pride and confidence that they did not possess previously. But their words clearly distinguish between personal identity and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). At the personal level, the students have gained a sense of pride and confidence following the understanding that they can succeed in academic, and of coping with failures. Socially, they have gained a sense of pride and confidence from the fact that their society is telling them that the knowledge they are acquiring has great value. These findings resemble those described in the literature on minorities in higher education and the personal and social empowerment it affords them (Modood, 2006; Sadeghi, 2008). The academic interlude empowers students and enriches their personal tools (Arar, 2017).

In their interviews, the female Arab students stressed the sense of self-fulfillment and empowerment they experience because of their learning. Their studies make them feel better about themselves and their capabilities. The findings of this study, like those in earlier studies, show that higher education constitutes a space for consolidation of gender identity for female Arab students. They undergo a process of personal and gender clarification (Perry, 2000), acquiring tools that help them break down the conventions limiting the space in which they could express themselves and participate. In the academic setting they experience empowerment and a heightened sense of personal autonomy (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011), a process that breaks down and rebuilds the perception of the collective identity (Helms, 1990).

Despite its importance, the current study has a limitation that should be considered when interpreting its results. This study is qualitative. It is based on a small sample and its findings can only serve as a basis for further studies. Broader research is required to confirm these findings and perhaps a quantitative component should be included. Regarding future research –It would be interesting to compare Arab students' experiences in Arab institutes in Israel (For ex: Al-Qasemi College) to Arab students' experiences in Jewish institutes.

Implications

The findings of this study are highly significant for lecturers teaching in multicultural academic institutions. They must know that these are students who come with social and learning gaps. It is important to reinforce the students' ability to succeed and provide them with academic study skills. Also, since the findings highlight the students' desire for social change in their society of origin, the faculty should cultivate these students' leadership skills, with an understanding of and familiarity with their society. That can be done by increasing the integration of Arab lecturers and faculty members into higher

education institutions in Israel, as they may serve as role models and help to remove academic, emotional, and social obstacles that Arab students might encounter during their academic studies. Moreover, they must consider that some of the women who come to study make tremendous efforts to do so. Mainly they lack time, because of the priorities expected of them, where home and family come first. Thus, the faculty must strive to empower the women, be attentive and help them as much as possible without lowering their demands for an appropriate academic level. A practical and much needed step to achieve this goal is by offering several full scholarships to Israeli-Arab women excelling in their first academic year.

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